

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEPROSY

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE INTERNATIONAL LEPROSY ASSOCIATION
PUBLISHED WITH THE AID OF THE
LEONARD WOOD MEMORIAL

Publication Office: 1832 M St., N.W., Washington 6, D. C.

VOLUME 30, NUMBER 4

OCTOBER-DECEMBER 1962

EDITORIALS

Editorials are written by members of the Editorial Board, and opinions expressed are those of the writers.

ENGLISH AS SHE IS SPOKE AND WRIT

Time was when Latin was the universal medium of cultural exchange. Theologians and natural philosophers, lawyers and scholars, whatever their mother tongue and nationality, were able to engage in a fruitful commerce of ideas in speech and in writing in that language. More recently, English has largely fulfilled this function, followed more or less closely by French and German.

From 1783 onwards, the name of Noah Webster has been associated with a dictionary of the English language published in the United States. In its successive editions this great work has reflected not only the original assumptions and objectives of Webster himself, but to an increasing measure the changes and developments in English as spoken and written in North America. While it has never set itself out to be an authoritative guide to correct English (as the French Academy does for the French language), "Webster" has been accepted as the standard in the U. S. Government Printing Office, and as the authority in American courts of law.

Consequently, the recent publication of the 3rd Edition of Webster's New International Dictionary (Unabridged) by G. and C. Merriam Co., Springfield, Mass. (1961), is an event that interests the English-speaking world in a variety of ways. It interests the readers of *THE JOURNAL*. Many of those whose mother-tongue is not English have been in the habit of referring to the 2nd Edition (1934) of Webster, not only for determining the exact meaning and use of scientific terms and everyday expressions, but, more important, for help in presenting their scientific work to the English-speaking or English-reading world.

Fortunately, the style "of most English-language medical writing today . . . is centered somewhere in mid-Atlantic," to quote the *Lancet's* review of a book published in the United States, and the recent trend to standardise (or standardize) technical nomenclature and style has had obvious advantages. In science, at any rate, Shaw's jibe about "two

peoples separated by a common language" is certainly not true. "After a period of linguistic lawlessness, American speech has ceased to draw away from English," wrote Eric Partridge in 1949. There is now little difference (except in accent and intonation) between English as it is spoken by educated and cultured persons on either side of the Atlantic, and even less in the English written by such persons. This is true of the literary as well as the scientific language.

The 3rd edition of Webster differs in some respects so markedly from the 2nd that its appearance has caused a furor in academic and literary circles in the United States and beyond. What right, it may be asked, has an Englishman to intrude upon this family quarrel, this domestic altercation? But the matter, like the name of the dictionary, is of international concern—the latter word used advisedly.

The main reason for all this fuss and pother is this: the 3rd edition records all extant words and expressions as spoken today in the United States, without indicating whether these words are "correct" or "incorrect" English. Whereas in the 2nd edition many dialect words were designated colloquial, or substandard, or vulgar, or slang, in the 3rd edition no such prescriptive indication is given. If the word is known to be in use—in everyday speech or in some form of writing—then it has a place in this dictionary.

The foreigner using the 3rd edition is thus faced with a bewildering richness of word and expression, and there is no guide to help him to choose aright or decide what usage he ought to adopt. In fact, he is virtually assured that there is no right or wrong; if a word has found a place in the pages of Webster it may be used, and used in the way exemplified in the numerous quotations from modern authors and speakers, some of whom (such as baseball players, or prizefighters, or the madam of a bordello) would scarcely have qualified as standard or reputable in the old-fashioned past.

To illustrate, the following words and expressions are recorded as being in use in America today: *ain't*; *like* (conjunctive, as in "like a cigarette should" taste); *learn* (in the sense of "teach"); *different to*; *between you and I*.

When the spoken word has achieved the permanence of print, it does not thereby become entitled to a reverence it would not merit on other grounds. Some new words are vivid and picturesque; others represent some new thing or idea; but some are unnecessary variations on older themes invented through ignorance, or laziness, or mere desire for novelty.

Granted, English is a living, growing language. It is incredibly rich, having borrowed from a score of languages ancient and modern. It is sufficiently flexible and adaptable to stand the strains of modern invention and discovery. But changes that are too widespread or too rapid,

or ill-advised, may result in an actual loss of clarity and cogency. On the other hand, diehard conservatism would restrict the innate vigour and potentialities of the language; it would often have closed the door to a host of worthy applicants, dressed in foreign or outlandish garb. Thousands of these immigrants have been welcomed in our midst, have settled down in company with native stock (itself a glorious mixture), and have proved their worth. Whatever their appearance, their credentials and their ancestry, they have contributed something of value to the language. But that is no reason for lowering our standards and allowing the base, the upstart, the meretricious to enter our linguistic heritage, unrestricted if not frankly encouraged.

In the matter of pronunciation, the new Webster cannot be granted an unqualified acceptance. Whereas the 2nd edition was helpful in indicating the standard pronunciation(s) current among educated and cultured Americans, the 3rd edition is frequently at pains to include the enormous number of variations recorded among all classes and conditions of men from the Atlantic to the Pacific—interesting as a summary of recorded facts, perhaps, but far from helpful to the non-English-speaking writer who seeks guidance, or, for that matter, to the educated American who finds occasion to seek advice.

Spelling has for long been a battle-ground between the diehards and the innovators, and it ill behoves an Englishman to enter the lists in full battle array. It is generally admitted that Noah Webster's early views on simplified spelling were too radical and hence unacceptable, but many of his suggestions have found favour (or favor) in America. Even the conservative British may now write *medieval* and *today* without fear of being *jailed* by the *public*, or criticized by *authors* or *tutors*.

Words are more than mere current coin; they are interesting and useful counters that have their origins and history, and we must be grateful that the iconoclastic zeal for reform did not proceed further. Otherwise, we might have spelt *sin* and *syntax* and *cinema* after the same fashion—to the confusion of those non-English-speaking writers reared in a classical tradition. It cannot be said that English English has never taken liberties with spelling in the past. It has not been always—or even usually—staid and respectable and rigidly opposed to all spelling reform. American English is even less bound by spelling tradition. You must still be careful when you thank an American to his face for his welcome *cheque* or his timely *succour* lest he misunderstands you.

New words you will find in abundance in the new Webster, but you will look in vain for definite indications to help you decide whether to use them in an article you are preparing for THE JOURNAL. Some of these words have long been part and parcel of American speech, and are accepted in American writing. But was it really necessary to coin “pro-

ponent," when such good old-timers as proposer, supporter, advocate, champion, are at hand and ready to do the same work? I realize I am skating on thin ice when I mention such words as "protagonist" and "anticipate" and "envisage," but I nevertheless plead for care and consideration in their use.

Worse than that, some definite and useful distinctions, long-accepted, you will find blurred or frankly disregarded in the new Webster. Does *depreciate* have the same meaning and use as *deprecate*? Or *forcible* as *forceful*? Or *uninterested* as *disinterested*? Or *infer* as *imply*? If you have a mind for precision and an ear for the niceties of language, you will squirm as you read such entries.

In conclusion, I would advise you to retain and use your 2nd edition of Webster. Don't be deceived by specious advocacy of the new. The old book, much-fingered and perhaps dog-eared and yellowing, is good for another decade or two. Don't shut your mind to the new and novel just because it is new or novel. But, although Webster 3rd might perhaps condone a sentence like this:

There weren't one single bacillus on that slide different to the rest and, between you and I, I ain't no beginner neither.

please don't ask the Editor of this JOURNAL to accept an article written in that manner.

No, language is still "the indispensable tool of communication," and despite all its many good qualities (which we have been unable to cite at length, lacking both time and space) the 3rd edition of Webster cannot, we feel, materially help the non-English-speaking writer—or anyone else—as much as the 2nd. Perhaps reference to its pages will stimulate us to greater clarity of thought and precision of utterance as we strive to distinguish the genuine from the spurious, and the enduring from the ephemeral.

I close by quoting a few well-expressed sentences from Darmesteter's *Historical French Grammar*:

"When expressing a new fact, a popular neologism is legitimate and should be accepted. Should it only express an existing fact in a different way, we must resist its introduction as long as we can, and only give way when it has been adopted by the majority. The people are sovereign in matters of language; their errors even, once adopted, become law. But to the revolutionary forces, which are sweeping on the popular language only too fast, we must oppose respect for tradition, for the most precious interests of the language are at stake."